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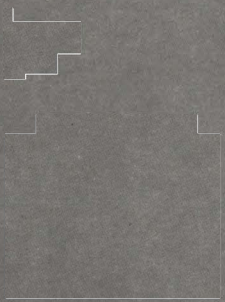

We knew something had changed before we got downstairs. Our house didn't smell like morning. On the stair landing, the three of us paused to sniff, gathering ourselves up the way you do before entering a place for the first time. We bunched the loose fabric of our matching nighties in our hands, the nighties with tiny roses on them that our mother had laid out on our beds the night before.

The air, as we crossed through the living room, was thick and smoky. In the corner, the branches of our Christmas tree drooped and the ornaments looked dull in the dim light from lamps that had been draped with tapestries. A murky, strange smell mixed with the pine scent. A cat—we didn't have pets—streaked across the room and disappeared under the sofa.

In the kitchen, a woman we didn't know sat at our table with her back to us.

We were used to sitters, usually college girls who looked like we wanted to look one day: long hair in feathered, Farah-Faucet cuts, sparkly make-up, designer-label clothes we were still too small for. We knew how to get these girls to do what we wanted. We told them about how we never knew when we'd see our dad now that he'd moved in with his secretary, about how our mother had gotten a job working for a podiatrist, a word we had learned to pronounce in four careful syllables—pod-i-a-trist—and how she went to school nights for nursing. Then the sitters would go along. They gave us the answers to our homework and ordered pizza in the afternoons and took us to the ice cream parlor near campus. If they hesitated, we'd start to dial our mother's work number.

But the woman in our kitchen wasn't a college girl. Even from the back we could see that. Her backside bulged out beyond the chair and her hair—we'd never seen so much hair. The single loose braid, dull brown mixed with gray, couldn't hold it all in. From the doorway, we could smell the sour dough smell that we later came to associate with her, but maybe that's wrong; maybe what we smelled then was the absence of our mother, the gardenia scent that always preceded her and lingered after she was gone.

The woman spoke without turning around. "I'm Reva."

We stood at the door, waiting. When the tea kettle on the stove whistled, she rose from the chair and lifted it, streamed steaming water into her mug. Despite her bulk, she moved like someone walking through water, all the layers of clothes she wore swishing—three skirts on top of each other, from what we could tell, and a lumpy blouse with a lopsided cardigan, one sleeve and one bottom edge longer than the other, as if made for two different people. "Your mother," she said, cupping her mug in two hands and turning toward us, "has gone away for a rest. She'll be back on New Year's Day."

The youngest of us, Lizzie, started to whimper. How could we adjust to any more changes? But Reva paid no attention. She sat down again and sipped her tea as if we weren't there. Not knowing what else to do, we sat across from her and stared at her face, which was, like the rest of her, oversized, sloppy and fleshy, like soft clay that might be reshaped. You could see the pores in her skin.

No one spoke until, finally, one of us said, "Our mother fixes our breakfast."

"I'm not your mother," she said.

Eventually we put our own pop-tarts in the toaster, but the aroma wasn't comforting like when our mother did it. In that strange atmosphere, the pastries smelled too sweet.

It was the last week of Christmas break, when we would have usually played with friends, slept over at each others' houses, met at the mall in the bigger town just north of ours. But we didn't call our friends or pick up the phone when it rang. We went where Reva went, places we'd never been even though we'd lived in Ellisville

our whole lives. Sitting on the torn-up back seat of her old green van, which didn't have seatbelts, we slammed against each other in one direction and then the other as she drove the curving roads. Our stomachs jumped, then settled, jumped and settled, when the van plunged and rose over the hills.

She took us to graveyards—but not those like where our grandma was, in our mother's words, laid to rest, places with grass mowed short and vases of plastic flowers in front of each stone. No, the cemeteries Reva took us to were untended. The ground dipped where the graves were. To get to them we had to tromp across winter woods and pastures, past sticker bushes, up steep stairs cut into rock.

In the oldest ones, the ages of the dead were listed to the day: *Joseph E., son of J.O. & Ana Giles, died 1 Oct. 1856, aged 1 year 2 ms. 13 ds.* When there were only dates, Reva subtracted them, pointing out the graves of children who had died at seven, nine, eleven, our ages.

In one place, the stones lay flat on the ground in even rows divided into two sections. We read the names aloud, doing our best to pronounce them: from one side, Melvin Orloff, Rene Goethals, Goldie DeGarmo, Alva Throckmorton, Floyd Hambin Joseph, George Bakerich, Ernest Elk, Walter Limbiewicz, Mike Kubala; from the other, Willa Leport, Dorothea Maynard, Ophelia Brancks, Laberta Liberatore, Mary Swazcy, Sadie Postlethwait, Teresina Veeney. "Why," we asked Reva, "is it girls' names on one side and boys' on the other? Why are all the last names different?" Our grandma, we knew, was buried next to our grandpa, who had died before we were born; they shared one stone—the second date for our grandma had been left blank for all those years.

"Their families didn't want them," Reva said. "They lived most of their lives in the asylum, and were buried here when no one claimed them." Descending the stairs, we clustered close to her, tripping up in her skirts, and she paused for us to sort ourselves out. Even in the cool air, that sour, yeasty smell rose up from her.

Christmas had been warm for Ohio—so warm we had worn tee-shirts outside in the lulls between rainstorms—and it had rained every day for more than a week. The streams running alongside the roads Reva drove had swelled over their banks. They looked crayoned-in gray over whatever was there, trees and other things we

couldn't see. The water tore downstream, carrying along branches and bottles and styrofoam cups and even whole tree trunks.

On one of these drives, a barricade blocked the road ahead of us as we dropped down a steep hill: DANGER HIGH WATER, the sign read. The engine of the old van sputtered as Reva slowed, and we held our breath, hoping she would stop. She leaned forward, almost touching the windshield, and, as if she had been able to see something we hadn't, swerved around the barrier.

Ahead, the wet road glinted. "We shouldn't . . . It said . . . " we protested.

"Nothing risked, nothing gained," Reva said. Her voice was deep and raspy, like water running over gravel.

When we crossed the flooded sections, we held our feet in the air, as if that might keep us from stalling. And we didn't stall. Each time the van skated through. The weight of Reva's body was enough to hold us down.

When Reva finally pulled into a parking area and we piled out, the sensation of solid earth under our feet took us by surprise. She never discussed our destinations ahead of time, nor any purpose, but we had a vague sense that she expected us to extract some lesson from these outings. We were at some sort of state park, and, as usual, Reva set out without commentary while we scrambled to keep up. Big as she was, Reva never got winded. When the trail split, she took the right fork, the one that went straight up. Every so often, there were signs warning hikers not to leave the trail and not to climb the rocks. Our mother would have called our attention to these, and we would have ignored them, thrilling at her shrieks when we climbed up the sheer faces or tottered on high ledges. But with Reva we knew better: she wasn't going to protect us. We kept to the trail, struggling with each step to lift our stone-heavy legs.

Reva stopped when she reached the trail's high point, and breathed out a stunned "oohh." When we caught up, we saw why: We were standing on the rim of a jagged cut of rock that plunged down so far that the trees at the bottom looked miniature. Reva smiled, showing her yellow, crooked teeth. "It's called a hollow," she said.

She continued on, along what didn't seem to be a trail at first, only the rocks that formed the cliff. We walked as far from the edge as possible, letting bushes scrape

against our legs. Reva got ahead of us. When we caught up, she was standing in front of a ribbon of bright yellow tape, peering down into the gorge.

"There," she said as we reached her. "That's where he fell." Clutching her skirts, we looked where she was pointing. Halfway down, on a flat rock jutting out from the cliff we could see an uneven pattern of red-brown blotches outlined by yellow tape.

"Did he die?" we asked. In the woods, a high-pitched kuk kuk kukkeekeekeeke ekeekeekeekuk kuk rang out and we huddled closer.

"He did," she said.

"When, when did it happen?"

"Yesterday."

We asked who it was, but she didn't know.

All week, temperatures had been falling. The damp of our sweat from the climb, now that we had cooled down, chilled us. We pressed up against the warmth of Reva's torso. Although we had learned complaining went nowhere with her, when Lizzie said, near tears, that she wanted to go home, Reva turned back, retracing our steps rather than leading us the longer way around.

On the day of our final outing with Reva, temperatures had fallen to below freezing and snow dusted the trees and grass. A gray skin had formed over the flooded fields we drove by. On the path she led us down, ice made the way slick and we fell on the inclines, slid down to bottom and pulled ourselves up by grabbing hold of a nearby tree. The waterfall we passed had metamorphosed into a tangled mane of ice, each strand a braided glass rope. Breaking off spines from adjacent icicles, we let them melt in our mouths.

There were only a few stones, hardly a cemetery really, at the place where she stopped, on a thin level strip projecting from the ridge. It wouldn't have taken much for them to topple down. One was knocked over. Letters were carved into it, so eroded the only ones we could make out were *f-o-l-l-o*—follow, we decided, tracing the possible w on the stone.

We hadn't noticed the backpack Reva was wearing until she slipped it off and extracted a roll of thin, black paper and chunks of gold-colored crayons. Giving us

each one, she spread the paper over the stone. "Go ahead," she said, "hold the wax on its side and rub back and forth."

Each of us starting in a corner, we did. When our gold streaks met and filled the space, we pulled back and stared. The words stood out clearly:

Remember man as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.

Our parents had not allowed us to attend our grandma's funeral, but our mother had taken us to the funeral home to say goodbye. "See," our mother had said, lifting us up one by one to peer into the box, "she just sleeping. She's smiling a little, see there? That's because she's going to wake up in a better place." Our mother had given us each a pink carnation to lay on Grammy's chest before blowing her a goodbye kiss.

We read the poem aloud and when we got to the last line, to the word prepare, Reva lay down alongside the grave. The narrow ledge of ground was just wide enough to accommodate her large body. One by one, we joined her, oldest to youngest, stacked up against the hillside, absorbing each others' warmth.

As the week progressed, the Christmas tree dropped its needles on the living room rug. Our new dolls grew disheveled, their clothes torn and hairstyles ruined. Dirty laundry mounded on the floors where we'd thrown it. We no longer wore clothes in the coordinated combinations we'd selected at the stores, but put on anything we could find—summer tee-shirts underneath the ripped sweatshirts our father had left behind, tights and knee socks under capri pants when we'd run out of jeans, reds with greens and yellows, stripes with plaids. Uncombed, our hair—all three of us had long, wavy blonde hair that our mother would brush out each morning and evening and braid in two tight braids—formed knotty clumps.

Bowls and plates lay all around, on the coffee table, the floor, under the beds. Any

remnants of food had been licked clean by Reva's cats. We couldn't tell how many there were because they scattered as soon as we came into a room. They dug into the underside of the couch to make a den and spread the stuffing around the house. Their muddy paw prints edged our tub. We caught them lapping from the water glasses beside our beds. When we opened the door, they darted in or out, sweeping between our legs. On our pillows, they left tiny carcasses—birds and moles, once the head of a mouse with black bead eyes, its bloodless heart bulging out its mouth. The smell of cat pee from the piles of dirty clothes pinched our noses.

Reva liked to play games: chess, Scrabble, Chinese checkers, Yahtzee, Parcheesi. When we moved carelessly, not thinking past the next play, she did not raise her eyebrows dramatically or clear her throat as our mother might have, but took control of the game. Nor did she peer over the stands that held our letters to suggest possible words when we were stuck, or urge us to move a piece to safety, or allow us an extra roll when our dice didn't add up to anything.

For meals, there were pots of soup she kept simmering on the stove that tasted sweetish and spicy and foreign. We ladled the goop into bowls; when we swallowed, the slimy parts slid down our throats before we could chew them. We hunted out the packages of cookies and leftover Halloween candy our mother had hidden in the backs of the cupboards, and ate all the ice cream in the freezer. When that was gone, we just ate Reva's soups, with the odd flat bread she baked.

At night we watched shows our mother never would have let us watch—*Ghost Story* and *Night Gallery* and *Sixth Sense*, shows that made us grab each others' hands and close our eyes. We fell asleep to Johnny Carson's voice on *The Tonight Show*, and woke up frightened from our dreams.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve, we found Reva rummaging through the box of rags our mother used for cleaning. She reached in and pulled them out one by one, shaking them loose: our father's Ohio State tee-shirt, torn squares of sheets, an apron, a pair of boxer shorts, a night gown we had each worn as toddlers. "This will work," she said, when she got to the night gown. "And this"—she plucked out a baby-sized pillowcase, pink with gold edging.

Next we knew, she had the sewing machine set up and was stitching shut the bottom of the gown and the sleeves. Along the top of the pillowcase she sewed some yellow fringe she found in our mother's sewing basket. Then she told us to ball up sheets of newspaper for stuffing. She attached the head to the body with needle and thread. She used a marker to draw eyes and an O mouth.

Finished, she held it up to us. "What do you hope for the New Year?" she asked.

We all wanted the same things: We wanted our mother to return home, home the way it used to be; we wanted our parents back together; we wanted our mother there when we got home from school; we wanted to hear her fluty voice singing our questions back to us; we wanted to breathe the smell of Grammy's kitchen, ripe peaches and gingerbread baking; we wanted to sit the three of us balanced on our father's knees listening to stories about Ginnie Giraffe and Katie Kangaroo and Lizzie Llama.

On the floor in front of us Reva spread out colored markers. "Write it on the doll," she said.

We wrote it, everything we could think of: We wanted a little dog; we wanted all A's in school; we wanted more friends, different friends; we wanted no chores; we wanted a mall, right there in our town; we wanted a foot of snow, a week of snow days; we wanted double chocolate chip brownies; we wanted our favorite teacher for every grade; we wanted the carnival to set up permanently; we wanted watermelon jelly beans; we wanted new clothes, only new clothes; we wanted summer all year round; we wanted caramel apples; we wanted Saturday mornings every day; we wanted to ride roller coasters, bungee jump, and spelunk. Our lettering, the same shapes formed in different sizes, covered the skirt, the back, the chest, even the face of the doll. The sprawling lines overlapped until none of it was legible.

New Year's Eve night, we sucked on candy sticks, the flavors changing from tangerine to blueberry to bubble gum to root beer as we worked our way down the spirals. That afternoon, Reva had taken us to the candy shop and let us pick

out whatever we wanted. We ate ourselves sick, scraping candy dots off paper rolls with our teeth, gnawing on jawbreakers, plying caramel off the roof of our mouths with our tongues.

An hour or so before midnight, Reva asked us to carry up logs from the woodpile out back. We didn't use the fireplace, we told her, not since our father had left. "Just get the wood," she said and when we brought it up, one or two pieces at a time, she built a tower, alternating the layers so the logs lay crossways, front to back, and crossways again. She said, "Fires need plenty of breathing room." Then we scrunched up newspaper and stuffed it underneath. It lit with a whoosh that subsided once the paper had burned, but the bark still smoldered. She blew on it, making it flare up in spots.

Pulling out a box of sparklers, she led us outside to the front lawn where she held matches to them and handed them to us. We danced and wrote letters in the air. When the box was empty, she said, "Now it's time."

Inside, she retrieved the doll.

"What will we do with it?" we asked.

"Burn it. Are you ready?"

Without answering, we followed her back to the fire, which was now smoldering, the logs glowing red.

"It's too big to fit," we said. But she was already shoving it in, jabbing it with the iron poker. Flames engulfed it and, suddenly, the whole doll shot up the chimney. The flames died back and large black flakes like pieces of bark circled in the space at the base of the chimney; below, the red-hot embers crumbled into ash.

The last time we had seen our father—a night he took us bowling—he told us he wanted to be cremated. We thought at first that must have something to do with sweets. "I won't be buried with your mother and grandparents now," he explained. "What I want is for my ashes to be scattered over Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, where I used to hike with my uncle." We hadn't known he had done that. He'd never told us.

Now, as our wishes ascended on boats of ash and turned into smoke that caught in our throats, we wondered what happens when one thing becomes another: does

it still exist? Maybe even then we knew that we would not grow up to be who we had thought we would.

"Reva," we asked, "what about our wishes now?"

If Reva responded, we didn't hear because we were listening to the sirens grow louder and louder. Outside, fire trucks pulled up in front of our house. We ran out the door and when we turned, flames were shooting from our chimney and falling, dancing on the roof like fireworks. Yellow-suited firefighters swarmed across our yard, some pulling hoses from the truck closest to our house, while others crossed the street to the fire hydrant. A giant in full gear—all glossy black and yellow, a metal tank gleaming on its back, face masked, looking like nothing human—approached us. When a gloved hand removed the helmet and pushed the hood back, a woman's face was revealed. Squatting down at our level, she asked us if anyone else was inside the house and, when we shook our heads, told us to sit on the bench swing in the front yard, well away from the commotion, and not move. Reva, standing on the other side of the yard, appeared small, insubstantial. We watched as silver arcs shot up over our house and rained down on the flames. In the cold, steam rose from the water. Breathing, we tasted smoke and mist.